

Great American Schools: The Power of Culture and Passion

by Louise Wilson

Imagine a school in which all children excel to high levels, regardless of their backgrounds, that treats all children as gifted and builds on their strengths through enrichment strategies in which all members of the school community develop a vision of their ideal school and . . . collaborate to achieve that dream.

—National Center for Accelerated Schools PLUS, 2006

Children are curious and naturally passionate learners: “The desire to learn, to discover, to figure something out, and to be able to do something well enough to proclaim it as one’s own must surely be as strong as any impulse in the human soul” (Fried 2001, p. 127). Why then do so many children dislike school—the place society created to nourish their minds so that they can experience personal fulfillment and societal contribution? How have the joyful, engaging, life-enhancing learning environments that many once envisioned been transformed into repetitive, mechanistic, teach-to-the-test institutions?

Wonderful schools don’t simply have to be imagined. Phenomenal examples of education going right for children exist in the United States. These schools are serving all populations of children and families. What becomes clear, even with schools that appear quite different from one another, is that common themes emerge across effective schools and contribute to what makes them impressive yet replicable models (Newmann, Secada, and Wehlage 1995; Daggett 2005). An identifiable culture and a passion for the learning of all students are noticeable elements in wonderful schools.

Schools in This Study: What Can We Learn from Them?

Over five months during the fall and winter of 2005–2006, I traveled across the United States to visit schools that are implementing creative

and effective models of education. The survey included models that exist in multiple schools, such as Expeditionary Learning, Accelerated Schools PLUS, International Baccalaureate (IB), Ed Visions, and Big Picture Company, as well as such exemplary individual schools as High Tech High in San Diego, Key Learning Community in Indianapolis, and Eagle Rock School in Estes Park, Colorado. I also interviewed researchers and leaders in school reform to try to understand what we know about effective education (see Table 1).

These successful schools exhibit significant commonalities that deserve further study and replication. They are implementing what we know about how people learn (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking 1999),

Schools Visited	Interviews
Affiliated Alternatives Accelerated School, Madison, Wisconsin	Dr. John Bransford, Project LIFE, University of Washington
Eagle Rock School, Estes Park, Colo.	Elizabeth Brock, International Baccalaureate North American Headquarters, New York
Fenway High School, Boston	Dr. Joe Campione, University of California, Berkeley
High Tech High and High Tech High International, San Diego	Dr. Gene Chasin, Accelerated Schools PLUS (Powerful Learning Unlimited Success)
Illinois Math Science Academy, Naperville, Illinois	Dr. Greg Farrell, Expeditionary Learning
Key Learning Community, Indianapolis, Indiana	Bruce Goldberg, Co-nect Schools
The Met, Providence, Rhode Island	Susan Kovalik and Karen Olsen, Susan Kovalik & Associates
Minnesota New Country School, Henderson, Minnesota	Victor Kuo, Sheri Ranis, Peter Garcia, Bill & Melinda Gates Educational Foundation
Mission Hill School, Boston	Dennis Littky, Big Picture Company
Patrick Henry High School, International Baccalaureate Program, Minneapolis	Dr. Deborah Meier, Coalition of Essential Schools and Harvard University
Rocky Mountain School of Expeditionary Learning, Denver	Ron Newell and Doug Thomas, EdVisions, Minnesota
Rufus King High School, Milwaukee	Dr. Lauren Resnick, University of Pittsburgh
School of Environmental Studies at the Minnesota Zoo, Apple Valley	
Sheppard Accelerated School, Santa Rosa, California	
Southwest High School, International Baccalaureate Program, Minneapolis	

Table 1. List of schools visited and interviews conducted

not advocating a strict “teach and test” mentality. In fact, these school models are implementing lessons that educators learned in the 1970s and 1980s about the value of high standards and authentic, constructivist learning and assessment.

Common features and characteristics evident in these schools include:

- Guiding principles that focus all stakeholders
- High standards, including a commitment to postsecondary advancement of students
- Belief in each student being known, understood, and encouraged
- Emphasis on student inquiry, experiential learning, learning in depth, and interdisciplinary learning
- Some degree of choice inherent in the program
- Commitment to higher-order thinking and to students practicing creativity and innovation, analysis and evaluation, and real-world problem solving
- Belief in the importance of personal values, democratic process, integrity, and morality



Culture and Passion of Effective Schools

Two prominent conceptual frameworks in the educational philosophies of effective schools surfaced. I have labeled these two frameworks *culture* and *passion*.

The *culture* of the school integrates and implements its mission and vision. It is sustained by consistent leadership that engages stakeholders; a purpose that is clear; a value system that guides behavior and builds respect; flexibility of design that includes choice; and relationships and a sense of caring that reach all learners and the community beyond.

The *passion* of the school is for its children and their learning. The passion that drives great American schools includes authentic, relevant, and meaningful learning; high expectations and rigorous learning experiences; authentic assessment; and empowerment of teachers and learners.

The School Culture

Those of us familiar with schools know that we can walk into a school building and instantly identify the climate: a positive, happy, productive place or an oppressive, threatening, joyless one. Key contributors to positive, productive schools are building a culture of learning into the vision and mission of the school and making sure that everyone knows and believes it. They are the “underlying shared beliefs, history, assumptions, norms, and values that manifest themselves in patterns of behavior” (Thompson 2002).

Sense of purpose and values

A meta-analysis of studies of successful schools identified “creating a culture” as first among ten central traits of successful schools (Daggett 2005). Of critical importance in establishing culture is a clear and ever-present sense of purpose. Clear guiding principles are at the forefront of curriculum and before students and teachers as they participate in the work of every day.

Leadership, democratic values, and accountability

Successful schools recruit and retain strong leaders. But sustainable culture survives beyond individual leaders because it exists in the heart and soul of the organization (Collins 2001; Fullan 2001; Hargreaves and Fink 2006). “Buy-in” and ownership of the philosophy are critical, and many oversight organizations won’t continue supporting a school if stakeholders aren’t committed. “Mission drift” can easily occur when purposeful adherence to mission and philosophy is not maintained.

Democratic principles play heavily into the culture and mission of great schools. Almost all the schools included in this study encourage significant participation by parents, students, and teachers. In many cases, parents and teachers serve on governing or advisory boards. Commitment to preparing students for participation in a democratic society is a core value.

Relationships and caring

Relationships and caring are critical elements of school cultures as well. An initial report on the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's efforts found that "students and teachers at newly established schools reported a very positive learning culture, characterized by close interpersonal relationships, common focus, and mutual respect and responsibility" (AIR and SRI 2004, p. 3).

The Gates Foundation began its work in school reform by focusing on funding small high schools. Over time it found that "small" was not itself sufficient to change the culture (AIR and SRI 2005). However, the presence of a small learning community combined with rigor and curricular relevance was found significant in measuring success; it was part of the missions of all the schools in this review. Every school placed a high priority on knowing and caring about students. Even in International Baccalaureate, which is often available in large high schools, partnerships, collaborative learning, and faculty mentoring are critical components.

Building relationships, however, also means reciprocal caring outside the school walls. Therefore, community service is another major part of many of these schools and models. In IB schools, all diploma graduates must perform one-hundred fifty hours of community service. Service is also a required element in The Met schools in Providence, Rhode Island, and Expeditionary Learning schools. Often, student-directed projects are driven by global or community issues, such as studying extinct and at-risk animal species at the School of Environmental Studies in Minnesota, or meeting Denver community needs through student activities at Rocky Mountain School of Expeditionary Learning.

A Passion for Learning

Great teaching traffics in enduring puzzlements, persistent dilemmas, complex conundrums, enigmatic paradoxes. Certainty is closed, and closed streets don't interest the mind. Great ideas have legs. They take you somewhere. (Eisner 2006, p. 44)

The power of culture and vision is what drives the passion for learning found in effective schools, and it is perhaps what strikes any visitor's heart and soul. At all the schools in this review, students wanted to talk excitedly about their work: building a fuel-efficient car; writing a report on the water quality of the San Diego Boat Channel for presentation to the water commission; and designing hypothetical cultures, including language, economic systems, governmental systems, geography, and cultural traditions. Third-graders were writing their own children's books under the guidance of an author; first-graders speculated about and studied how birds fly.

Meaningful learning

It shouldn't surprise us that wonderful schools are implementing exactly what we know about how people learn. These schools recognize the fundamental components of making learning relevant and meaningful—critical for making permanent neural connections in memory (Diamond and Hopson 1998). What we know about learning includes these principles:

- Learning builds on preconceptions and needs to be integrated and interdisciplinary.
- Building deep conceptual knowledge and expertise is critical to future learning.
- Students must learn problem-solving and learning strategies.
- Students learn best when learning is contextualized and authentic and when they respond to strategic, student-driven inquiry.
- Students benefit from metacognitive awareness of how they learn and in shared discourse with others.
- The brain loves challenges, problem solving, and relevant mysteries. (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking 1999; Diamond and Hopson 1998; Brown and Campione 1998)

Evidence from effective schools shows that basic skills and high test scores result when students are free to explore ideas, solve complex problems, interact with original sources and places, and make innovative and creative discoveries.

High expectations

Dagget (2005) found that the culture of a school must “embrace the belief that all students need a rigorous and relevant curriculum *and* all children can learn.” Every program, model, and school in this review built those premises into its core beliefs. In many cases, the concept that all children can learn, and learn at high levels, was considered a moral, guiding principle and a powerful component in creating productive and positive learning experiences for all students.

- Eagle Rock School, which serves teens from tough environments all over the United States, exudes an atmosphere of “we care about you” and “you can do it,” which is brought home to these teens by expectations of physical stamina in adventurous experiences, academic accomplishments in classroom work, personal sharing during morning gatherings, and zero tolerance for destructive and negative behavior.
- Accelerated Schools PLUS believes that the theories and practices of gifted and talented education should be applied to the learning of all kids; that they should all be challenged not only to achieve

at high levels but also to become independent learners, following their curiosities, wonders, and drives.

- The Met's students participate two days per week in real-world internships that involve researching issues such as "Why are buildings abandoned in certain neighborhoods and what is going on in them?" or engage in projects such as designing a fashion show for the work of young teen designers.

In several schools the curricular framework is designed around state standards, reorganized under themes or expectations. Some programs, such as those in Mission Hill School and Fenway High School in Boston, the School of Environmental Studies, and International Baccalaureate, build the curriculum around themes or habits of mind. Five habits of mind guide all curricular units and student projects at both Mission Hill and Fenway. In all their learning, students ask:

- What is the perspective or point of view?
- What is the evidence?
- Are there connections or patterns?
- Is there relevance?
- What can I hypothesize or imagine?

Authentic Learning and Assessment

The work of Newmann, Secada, and Wehlage (1995) on authentic learning reinforced issues related to quality instruction and relevant assessment.

The problem is that the kind of mastery required for students to earn school credits, grades, and high scores on tests is often considered trivial, contrived, and meaningless—by both students and adults. This absence of meaning breeds low engagement in schoolwork and inhibits transfer of school learning to issues and problems faced outside of school. (p. 7)

Newmann, Secada, and Wehlage identify three characteristics of effective schools that model authentic learning:

- Construction of knowledge, including higher-order thinking;
- Disciplined inquiry, which includes an opportunity to develop deep knowledge and engage in substantive conversation;
- Value beyond school, learning about things that connect to the world beyond the classroom. (Newmann, Secada, and Wehlage 1995)

Students can accomplish great things if principles of authentic learning are integrated intentionally into the philosophical frameworks of

schools and classrooms. Fenway High School, a member of the Coalition of Essential Schools, states that part of its mission is “to inspire other schools and educators to a thoughtful abandonment of inherited systems and priorities that are incongruent with knowledge and research on learning and behavior” (Fenway High School, n.d., p. 2).

Authentic assessment is another feature evident in many of these schools. Students at Mission Hill, Fenway High, Rocky Mountain School, Illinois Math Science Academy, and New Country Charter School participate in public exhibitions of their learning. That is true at elementary school levels as well as high school. In all cases, peers and teachers are part of the audience and evaluative teams. Sometimes, external teams of experts also participate in the evaluation.

Students at Mission Hill School collect examples of their work in portfolios of learning that are reviewed at benchmark points. There are required elements in each portfolio, and students also conduct a spontaneous research project on a topic assigned at assessment time.

Other assessment activities include real-world projects that result in reports submitted to relevant organizations or persons. The students at New Country Charter School routinely conduct projects in the community or start microbusinesses that are assessed by the success or failure of the project. Students at High Tech High produced a field guide—a comprehensive study of the shipping channel into San Diego harbor—that documented wildlife, water quality, causes of pollution, and volume of boat traffic. Students at Illinois Math Science Academy researched atomic energy for a report to the Sierra Club.

More-formal assessments are valued as part of preparing students for college admission. Focused preparation for the ACT and SAT tests and the college-application process occurs at The Met, Rocky Mountain School, Accelerated Schools, and the IB programs in inner-city Milwaukee and Minneapolis. Graduation rates and admission to postsecondary programs are significantly above average for these high school programs.

Empowerment and Commitment

At successful, effective schools, participants are empowered. Students have choices in what and how they learn. Schools such as the Key Learning Community intentionally use research and theory about multiple intelligences and learning styles to differentiate instruction that works for all students. Although High Tech High emphasizes technology and the sciences, art is also valued, and the visitor sees examples of student painting and sculpture visibly displayed.

Teachers are also empowered; they are part of decision-making. Teachers at these schools are committed to the philosophy of learning, a powerful aspect of what makes these schools work. Professional development, coaching, and intentional revisiting of goals are integral parts of

these programs. At Accelerated Schools, Expeditionary Learning, and The Met, as well as in International Baccalaureate, teachers and coaches spend many hours each year in staff development and training. Many have created professional-learning communities, in which each teacher functions as a member of a team. The team studies student progress and makes recommendations to the school as a whole.

Successful schools recognize the value of close partnerships with outside organizations as well. Many schools either maintain close relationships with the central organizations that support their model or receive support from local corporations or nonprofit organizations. Corporate sponsorship and support were evident at Eagle Rock School, which is wholly sponsored and supported by Honda Corporation, and High Tech High, which has several corporate sponsors and benefactors. Other schools, such as The Met, the School for Environmental Studies, and Rocky Mountain School of Expeditionary Learning, have partnerships with local businesses and organizations that provide real-world learning opportunities and internships.

Conclusion

In a *New York Times* article from November 2002, James Traub looked at three very different school reform models and concluded:

The current obsession with ensuring that children achieve basic reading and math literacy . . . may have obscured the more fundamental question of what it is that children learn to do with those skills. How do they become reflective citizens, with an informed, critical sense of the world around them? Is it a stock of relevant knowledge that they lack or is it a set of intellectual habits? Put otherwise, what is the relationship between “knowledge” and “understanding”? (Traub 2002)

Remarkable schools across our nation have visions for producing future citizens who are creative, inspired, and curious, who believe in themselves, and who can engage in inquiry, solve problems, and create art, literature, and inventions. The culture of these schools inspires students and teachers to accomplish great things, and the passion with which they implement their vision brings goals to fruition. School leaders, policymakers, and those preparing future teachers need to study what is going right in these schools and intentionally replicate what they learn from them. This is an era of demands from government and administration, but it is also an era of educational entrepreneurship.

Pause and imagine how you can help spread the magic of schools exhibiting cultures of curiosity and the passion of authentic learning. Consider where you are in the spectrum of educational options. What could you do tomorrow to make a difference in your classroom, your

school, your district? Imagine great schools right where you are and make them happen.

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